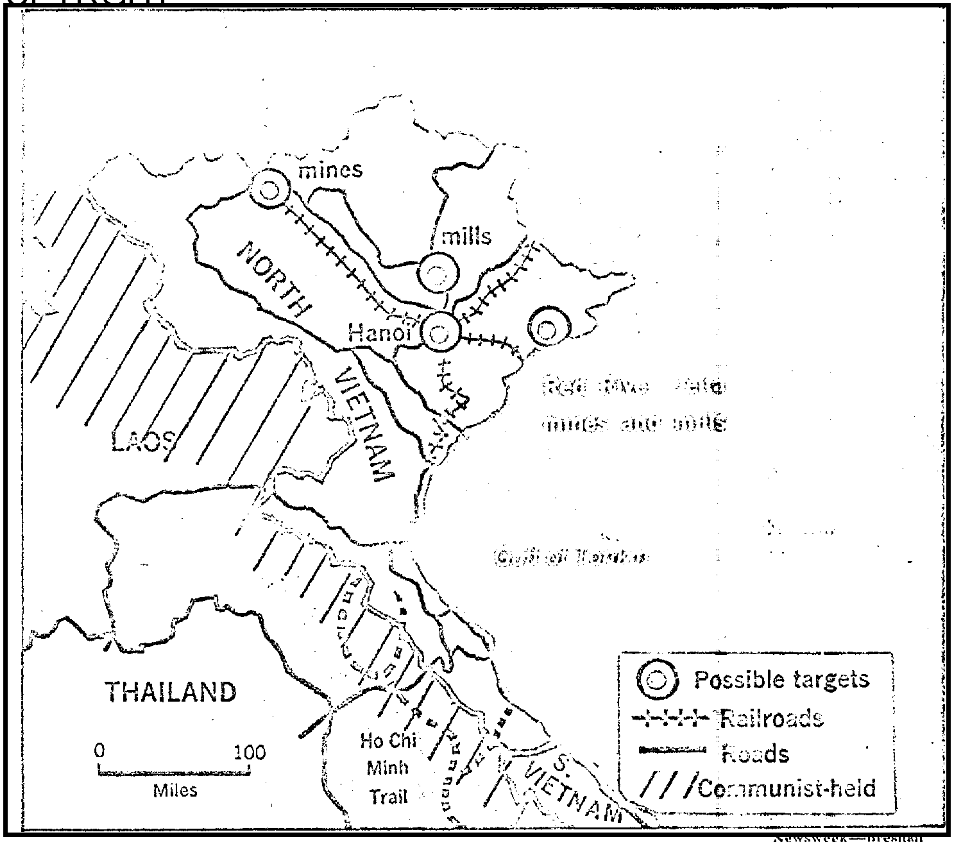
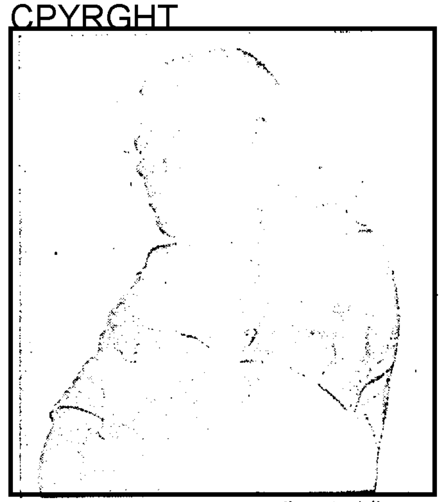


North Vietnam: A privileged sanctuary looms as a possible target

Newsweek
THE MAGAZINE OF NEWS SIGNIFICANCE



François Sully

Fact finder McNamara

Can the War in Vietnam Be Won?

When President John F. Kennedy committed U.S. power and prestige to the war in South Vietnam three years ago, it was generally conceded that the cost in men and money would be high. The Viet Cong guerrillas, backed and supplied by Communist North Vietnam, were a tough and dedicated enemy. But all of Southeast Asia seemed to be at stake, and Mr. Kennedy was convinced that U.S. support would enable the Saigon government to beat the Communists at their own chosen game of guerrilla warfare.

The presumption was an optimistic one, and last week—$1.5 billion and nearly 200 American lives later—President Lyndon B. Johnson was faced with what might prove the most crucial foreign-policy decision of his young Administration. The question facing the President: should the ground rules be changed in South Vietnam?

Two weeks ago, with the bad news of Viet Cong gains piling up in Washington, Mr. Johnson in a speech on foreign policy obliquely warned North Vietnam: "Those engaged in external direction and supply would do well to remember that this type of aggression is a dangerous game." According to some, the President's remarks were merely empty words which he hoped would frighten the North Vietnamese and the Red Chinese. But, last week, with a series of rapid-fire moves, Mr. Johnson convinced most Washington observers that he was engaged in something far more basic than an exercise in psychological warfare. First, the President set up a new interdepartmental "task force" on Vietnam under William H. Sullivan, 41, a close associate of tough-minded Under Secretary of State W. Averell Harriman. Then he accepted the resignation of Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman, a bouncy former intelligence officer who saw in Sullivan's appointment an erosion of his authority. In Hilsman's place, Johnson appointed William P. Bundy, 46, a Pentagon intellectual who is one of Washington's most knowledgeable men on Southeast Asia. Finally, it was announced that Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara would fly off to South Vietnam this week for another of his "fact-finding" tours.

Another Korea? What all this hustle and bustle seemed to signify was that for the first time, the White House was listening seriously to Pentagon proposals for striking back at the "privileged sanctuary" of North Vietnam—with the attendant risk of another, possibly far bloodier Korea.

Strangely enough, Mr. Johnson's hint that he was considering expanding the war drew only a perfunctory reaction from Moscow and Peking. "The Soviet people would not remain indifferent" to expansion of the Vietnam fighting, Moscow warned, and Red Chinese Premier Chou En-lai taxed Washington with "sabotage of the peace of Southeast Asia." But among U.S. allies, from Tokyo to Paris, the suggestion that the U.S. might adopt a more aggressive policy in South Vietnam was met with grave misgivings. In Japan, newspaper editorials were studded with such gloom-filled phrases as "collision course" and "perilous approach."

From Paris's Elysée Palace, where Europe's major critic of U.S. policy sits, there was no comment. But speaking for his chief, French Foreign Minister Maurice Couve de Murville restated General de Gaulle's view that, no matter what the U.S. did militarily, it was doomed to defeat in Southeast Asia.

On one point, at least, Couve was right: currently, U.S. prospects in South